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DEPARTMENT FOR AF DAS YAMAMOTO AND AF/E

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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: WIDESPREAD STUDENT PROTESTS DRAW HARSH
GOE RESPONSE

REF: ADDIS ABABA 04228

11. (U) Summary. Last week was marked by a series of small, but widespread student disturbances throughout Ethiopia, but predominantly in Addis Ababa and Oromiya. While the majority of student demonstrators called peacefully for the release of detained CUD leaders and the resignation of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, some students engaged in rockthrowing and vandalized government property. The GOE responded by sending out commando units to augment or even replace police crowd control units. According to media reports, protesting students were beaten, and in a few cases killed. The government temporarily closed several high schools and universities in response to the protests. The GOE likely sees these incidents as the leading edge of a new wave of unrest and is trying to deal with it decisively. U.S.-provided Humvees and other military vehicles patrolled cities to dissuade protests, however, student protests are continuing. End Summary.

SMALL PROTESTS SPREAD

12. (U) Private media reported that student protests, beginning on December 21, spread over the week to several high schools in Addis Ababa. Embassy RSO investigators describe the protests as small in nature, usually 10-25 students and largely peaceful, but noted that some of the non-peaceful protesters vandalized government property. Ethiomedia reported that students attacked police vehicles, government trucks and buses, calling for the immediate release of Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) leaders (reftel) and the end of the Meles Zenawi regime. The majority of protests occurred in and around high schools, but disturbances were reported at some elementary schools and universities. (Note: Students attending Ethiopian high schools can range from 14 to 21 years of age. End Note.)

13. (U) According to a variety of media reports, over 30 high schools in Addis Ababa alone have seen student protests since December 21. Embassy RSO investigators noted a decrease in early January in the number of protests being reported, but expected an upsurge January 4, coinciding with the resumption of pre-trial proceedings for detained opposition members.

GOVERNMENT REACTS FORCEFULLY

14. (U) Government reaction to the protests was swift and forceful. Local police responded initially to the majority

of protests, but as their resources stretched thin, Federal police and elite commando units in U.S.-provided Humvees were increasingly called in. Some of the protests disbanded peacefully, but police resorted to beating students brutally in many of the disturbances, according to a variety of media reports.

¶5. (U) Police have detained hundreds of students in connection with the protests. Independent media outlets and Voice of America (VOA) reported December 27 that Ethiopian security forces had rounded up an unknown number of high school students in Addis Ababa and took them to an undisclosed location. Reporting two days later, VOA announced that additional students had been arrested.

¶6. (U) While independent, private and international media outlets continued to report on the recent upsurge in student protests, state-run media outlets published little about the demonstrations. Information Minister Berhan Hailu merely stated that there were "minor problems" in the capital's schools.

OTHER REGIONS NOT IMMUNE TO GROWING STUDENT UNREST

¶7. (U) Student protests have not been limited to the capital city; private news sources have reported regional disturbances. Private newspaper Dagim Weekly reported that two students were killed in West Oromiya following a student demonstration asking the government to release Oromo prisoners. Tomar, another private weekly, reported that following student protests in Oromiya, the government arrested and held several people at an unknown location.

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Ethiopian Review reported December 26 that hundreds of people from West Oromiya were rounded up by special forces and taken to Senkele Police Training Center after students held protests demanding the removal of Zenawi. According to VOA, four secondary school students were killed in Oromiya following demands by students for greater protection of human rights. VOA noted that Oromo regional police officials have admitted that over 300 people have been arrested in connection with the disturbances.

¶8. (U) In Gondar, Ethiopian Review reported December 22 that in response to earlier protests police entered multiple schools in Gondar waiting for the students to arrive. As students gathered within the school compound, police sealed off exits and began beating them. An unknown number of deaths and injuries have been reported but not confirmed. The sub-regional administrator told Ambassador Huddleston, who visited Gondar shortly after the incident, that only two students had been injured. Ethiomedia reported January 2 that a student protest against the presence of police within school grounds resulted in many injured children and approximately 75 in police custody. The protests prompted regional authorities to close all schools in Gondar for one week.

COMMENT

¶9. (SBU) The government's heavy-handed tactics have probably aggravated what began as largely peaceful local student demonstrations. While these demonstrations are not comparable in scale of those in early November, they do signal both continuing popular anger over the detention of CUD leaders and a willingness (at least amongst the youth) to confront authorities. The GOE's tough response to student protesters seems to indicate that it sees the disturbances as the leading edge of another wave of unrest that it must address now before it spreads.

¶10. (SBU) We have protested through dipnote to the Foreign Ministry and conveyed our concerns in person to Director General of America and Europe Division Grum Abay, the Chief of the Army General Staff Lieutenant General Samoro Yones and National Security Advisor Mulugeta Alemseged about the use of Humvees for police-type actions. Defense Attach Colonel Rick Orth has argued to curtail Humvee purchases in the pipeline given General Samora's refusal to remove them from the streets of Addis Ababa. The Ambassador has also told the international media of our dissatisfaction.

HUDDLESTON